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ASK MAGAZINE: By practitioners for practitioners.

ASK VOLUME ONE:

STORIES

How Did I Get Here?

by Charlie Stegemoeller

Growing up, I rarely had to look for guidance. On my first job outside of home, for instance, I learned the value of workmanship. It was the summer before I started seventh grade, and like many young men at that age, I got my first taste of the working world by mowing lawns. The man who hired me for this position taught me to step back and look at my work, to evaluate it and consider whether I had done all that I could, and to ask myself was I ready to show this work to someone. This lesson has proven invaluable to me my entire life.

I was fortunate growing up to have had many fine mentors. There was never a shortage of people who were willing to offer me advice or teach me the most valuable lessons of life a young person needs to know. What has been different about my NASA experience is that I have had to seek out my mentors.

Once In – Then Where?

When I started at the Johnson Space Center (JSC) in June of 1985, I was assigned to the Business Administration Directorate as a technical analyst reviewing the Space Shuttle Program. As fortune stood, I worked for a very dynamic lead and team and focused on the "big picture" of planning and implementation across the Agency's Space flight programs. I was provided access to historical views of Agency resource planning and tradeoffs in management approaches. Following the loss of the Challenger, we conducted a rapid yet full agency assessment associated with tradeoffs necessary to rebuild the fleet of vehicles, meet the commitment to the ISS assembly, deal with the loss of reimbursable payloads and the costs to procure the expendable launch fleet necessary to fill the intervening void.

The Business team was not in the habit of developing or evaluating its personnel, and as an engineer in a budget group I realized it was quite possible they would not understand my strengths or potential. I knew I had to actively engage others in my development. The team I was on counseled each other as we approached the task. As I was new, I asked many questions of them and the various NASA and non-NASA people I worked with to develop my portion of the analysis. There was precious little time for anyone to guide me along, so I took the initiative myself.

I remained within the Business Directorate my first three years in a series of assignments: first as technical analyst supporting independent assessments within the JSC Comptroller's office; then as lead for the Center's Institutional Budgets; and then as the lead resource manager for the Crew and Thermal Systems Division within JSC's Engineering Directorate. These assignments exposed me to the full range of internal resources activity within the Center and within the Agency. I met the key managers across the Center and observed the successful approaches to managing large organizations. I was also exposed to the management styles and personalities that were not as successful in defending tasks and managing resources, and these lessons from what did not work have proven as valuable to me over time as those that did.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Stegemoeller is currently Manager for Human Space Life Sciences Programs Office at Johnson Space Center, responsible for the organization and direction of the Human Exploration and Development in Space Enterprise Lead Center programs for Biomedical Research and Countermeasure, Advanced Human Support Technology, and the Space Medicine crosscutting function.

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The assignment within the Crew and Thermal Systems Division exposed me to the dance of art and science in advanced technology developments, and it was at this point that I realized I needed to move out of the Business Directorate. I had figured out by then that I wanted to be involved in the planning and implementation of policy and programs that furthered the human exploration of space.

On Towards the Flight Program

I moved into the Space Station Freedom Project Office as the Technical Assistant for the Manager for Development. This office was staffed with experienced Apollo and Shuttle development managers and technical personnel. I intentionally sought out guidance and insight from these men and women on how things had been done in the past. Throughout this journey I continued into more technical project management-oriented responsibilities requiring the associated training to meet the tasks. My experiences have led me to value the hands on training offered by the variety of tasks I have been assigned and volunteered for versus the formal trainings that were available. Throughout my career I have stayed abreast of on-going training, but only as it was periodically inserted into my assignments. More often than not, I would ask the people I worked with for their experiences and solutions to certain tasks I was working on.

In Freedom, my assignments required me to interact with all of the office managers and technical leads. I used these interactions to extract the methodology and basis for the technical and business decisions that were underway. I also used the informal time to allow them to reflect on their stories from when they had been part of the initial activities with Gemini, Apollo, and Shuttle. They would reminisce "on the good old days," and from this I learned about the successes and failures of the past and to place them in context with the present. But this was not a formal process for learning. No one was assigned to mentor me or anyone else on the team. I knew that the older team members were the source of knowledge from the past and would aid in my ability to contribute to the future. It was my decision to seek out the stories and lessons learned.

One such story is from Gemini. The team had just finished fabrication of the new urine containment bag and was just one day away from flight at KSC. They needed to certify the bag for up to 7 g's. They filled the bag with water, found the strongest man they could find, ran a piece of rope from the board they nailed the bag to, and calculated how many revolutions the man would need to swing the assembly overhead to reach 7 g's. The bag passed the test and the unit was bundled up and flown to Canaveral as the new flight article. The moral of the story is all tasks are accomplishable – just be creative!

Mir and More

As Freedom became Alpha, I transitioned into the Space and Life Sciences Directorate, becoming the Payload Project Manager for the Phase 1 NASA/Mir Research endeavor. Every aspect of the development and implementation schedule had been shortened to align with a schedule of political events. My team was as young as I was with flight experience mostly in short duration missions on the Shuttle. The rigors of long duration space flight and the complexities of merging two distinct space-engineering cultures had not been fully considered as the plan for joint experiments and operations was signed.

This job required me to lift up the team each time we met hurdles and to find common ground for solutions for implementing our requirements within the Mir platform and program constraints. I had few senior managers and little time to seek out assistance. This condition opened my mentoring pool now to include Russian-trained managers and technical leads. I sought out their knowledge and approaches for managing the complexities of long duration space flight and the approaches associated with managing the personnel within these structures.

The senior Russian lead, Oleg Lebedev, a veteran of many Russian space flight endeavors, provided me with council and friendship as we negotiated the means to integrate into the Russian platform. As our relationship developed, he shared his insights into organizing the American proposals into winning Russian strategies. No US or Russian policies were violated. More importantly, new strategies were formed to enable the desired results.

"I struck out on this path on my own based on my internal voice telling me that it was not expedient to wait for someone to come up to me and tell me how I am doing and how I might succeed."

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The Phase 1 assignment required me to use every aspect of the technical, professional and personal skills I had acquired in managing such a complex and varied suite of crosscutting tasks – people, politics, cultures, technologies, research and space flight. All of my mentoring experiences came into play, and the team – both Russian and American – came together to achieve the objectives.

The Present Plateau

Upon completion of this assignment, I was selected to manage a new Lead Center office for the coordination of the Human Space Life Sciences Programs at JSC, and this is where I am now. This position has allowed me the opportunity to directly influence and develop original policies and approaches for the human exploration of space. This assignment is what I recognized and sought out from the beginning.

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From the very beginning, I plotted my career path and identified the choices to make and the organizations and individuals who might contribute to my development. I sought out supervisors, my managers and peers for feedback and guidance on task-related performance as well as career evaluation and direction. I struck out on this path on my own based on my internal voice telling me that it was not expedient to wait for someone to come up to me and tell me how I am doing and how I might succeed. The character of NASA is one where they will catch up to you if you are not performing, but let you go on if you are. My self-established pattern of proactive dialogue with managers and peers is what has afforded me a great deal of cross cutting experiences, insight, and connections across JSC and the Agency. Had I depended upon the formal performance review process or on someone else to recognize my potential value and seek to develop it, I suspect I would not have arrived where I am.

I now am engaged in the process of sharing and creating stories with peers in pursuit of the goals of this Agency. I find that these exchanges are a form of collaborative mentoring, and I have also found that by drawing people into sharing their approaches, their stories, I have engaged them into collaborating on the insights required to solve problems. I am very pleased to find out that as I continue my quest for learning, this time through sharing stories, I am also helping my peers by practicing some kind of mentoring.

Lessons Learned

1. Leadership (entrepreneurial) behavior manifests even in self-development. However, it must not be misunderstood as self-development in the sense of opportunistic, politically focused, How-can-I-get-ahead behavior. Rather the focus is on task, organization, learning, growth, volunteering, etc. Career growth can occur by making a few smart career choices (continuously) but is primarily through learning.

2. People develop primarily on the job, by doing, by working with and for experienced people, and by seeking feedback.

3. The best preparation for leadership is not by staying within one function, but by experiencing a variety of tasks. **ASK**

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Question

Should the agency promote Charlie's style of self-development? And if yes, how can it be promoted?
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